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The Price of Secrecy

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On July 11, five days before the 50th anniversary of the world's first test explosion of an atomic bomb, the United States government released the first batch of some 2,200 coded messages to Moscow, in which one could read the details of how Communists stole the secret of nuclear weapons.

That they had done so became evident in the summer of 1946 when Meredith Gardner, a cryptographer with the Army Signal Intelligence Service, broke into one of the messages and found it contained a list of the leading scientists working on the Manhattan Project.

The messages are known in tradecraft as the VENONA Intercepts, a made-up word denoting the maddeningly dense cipher the Soviets were then using. The July 11 ceremony, held at CIA headquarters, was not least in honor of the "Heroes of VENONA," the code breakers who worked at their task from February 1943 to 1980.

The existence of a Soviet spy ring and the involvement of American Communists—"Fellow Countrymen" was the KGB code word for them—has long been established. Of late, details have been flooding in from Moscow. But this is the first American archive to be opened.

It raises a haunting "what if" question. What if the American government had disclosed the Communist conspiracy when we first learned of it? The standard objection to doing so would have been that the Soviets would learn we were reading their traffic. ("Protect sources and methods," as they say in the intelligence business.) But the Soviets had learned: An American cipher clerk passed the information on to them in 1948, although he was not discovered until 1950 (nor prosecuted: Never reveal sources and methods). By 1949 the Soviet spy Kim Philby *had* arrived with the British mission in Washington, serving as an intelligence liaison officer. He visited the VENONA site and received summaries of VENONA translations. The KGB quickly changed codes.

In the meantime, the Canadians and the British had broken into atomic spy rings. The knowledge was public: Los Alamos had been infiltrated. Sure-

ly, the Soviets were building a weapon of their own, else why would they block all American efforts at the United Nations to establish an international regime that would gradually share the secret in return for international controls.

Time was short, but what if, say, early in 1949 the American government, busy testing new weapons, had told the American public to expect that the Soviets would get their own bomb, and sooner rather than later—that they had got hold of many of our plans. (Their first device, detonated in August 1949, was almost an exact copy of ours.) Suppose further that the U.S. government had told the public that even without our secrets, the Soviet scientists were plenty good enough to figure it out in time.

I would take this latter point to be crucial. Just recently, the venerable Hans Bethe, who discovered fusion as the source of the energy of the sun, gave a luminous lecture, "My Road From Los Alamos." (He was there, of course.) After the war the scientific community was divided as to whether we should respond by building an H-bomb—a fusion bomb. There was also some question as to whether this was even possible. Then, early in 1951, Stanislaw Ulam and Edward Teller came up with a solution. It followed that if we could, they could. (Sakharov did.) Bethe continues that "[J. Robert] Oppenheimer and I concluded that it *HAD* to be done."

We did it in 1952. They did it in 1953. The modern era was complete.

The modern era? Just so: that in which the methods of science are universally accessible and so, accordingly, are the secrets that science holds. This is crucial, but the American people really didn't believe it then, at least about Russia, say, or Japan. (I was in the Navy toward the end of the war. We all knew that the Japanese had stolen the plans to one of our battleships. How else could they have built theirs?)

In 1956, Edward A. Shils of the University of Chicago published "The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Secu-

rity Policy." He captures perfectly the mood of the early 1950s:

"The American visage began to cloud over: Secrets were to become our chief reliance just when it was becoming more and more evident that the Soviet Union had long maintained an active apparatus for espionage in the United States. For a country which had never previously thought of itself as an object of systematic espionage by foreign powers, it was unsettling."

The larger society was facing "an unprecedented threat to its continuance." In the circumstances, "The fantasies of apocalyptic visionaries . . . claimed the respectability of being a reasonable interpretation of the real situation." A culture of secrecy took hold within American government while a hugely divisive debate raged in Congress and the press.

Some saw conspiracy everywhere. Recall that in 1951 Sen. Joseph McCarthy published "America's Retreat From Victory: The Story of George C. C. Marshall." Some denied any such possibility and accused the accusers. Loyalty oaths and background checks proliferated, and all information became Top Secret. As the scientists could have told us, this deeply impaired our analytic capacity, even as it concealed the decline.

We got through it. But the world remains a dangerous place, and it is just possible we might learn something from the VENONA files. Had they been published in 1950, we might have been spared the soft-on-communism charge that distorted our politics for four decades. We might have been spared the anti-anticommunist stance that was no less unhelpful. We might have been spared the execution of the Rosenbergs.

What if we had? In any event, what if a not dissimilar crisis arises in the future? What if this time we opt for openness?

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